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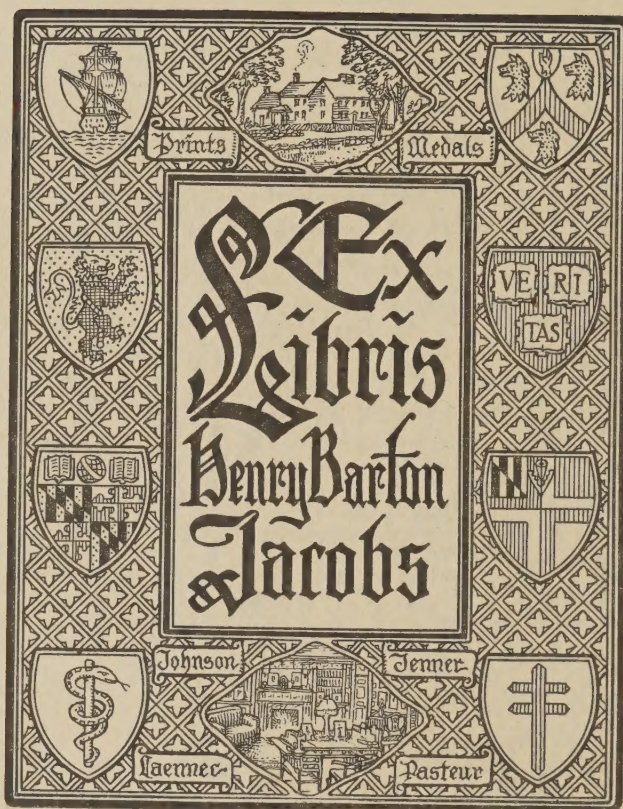












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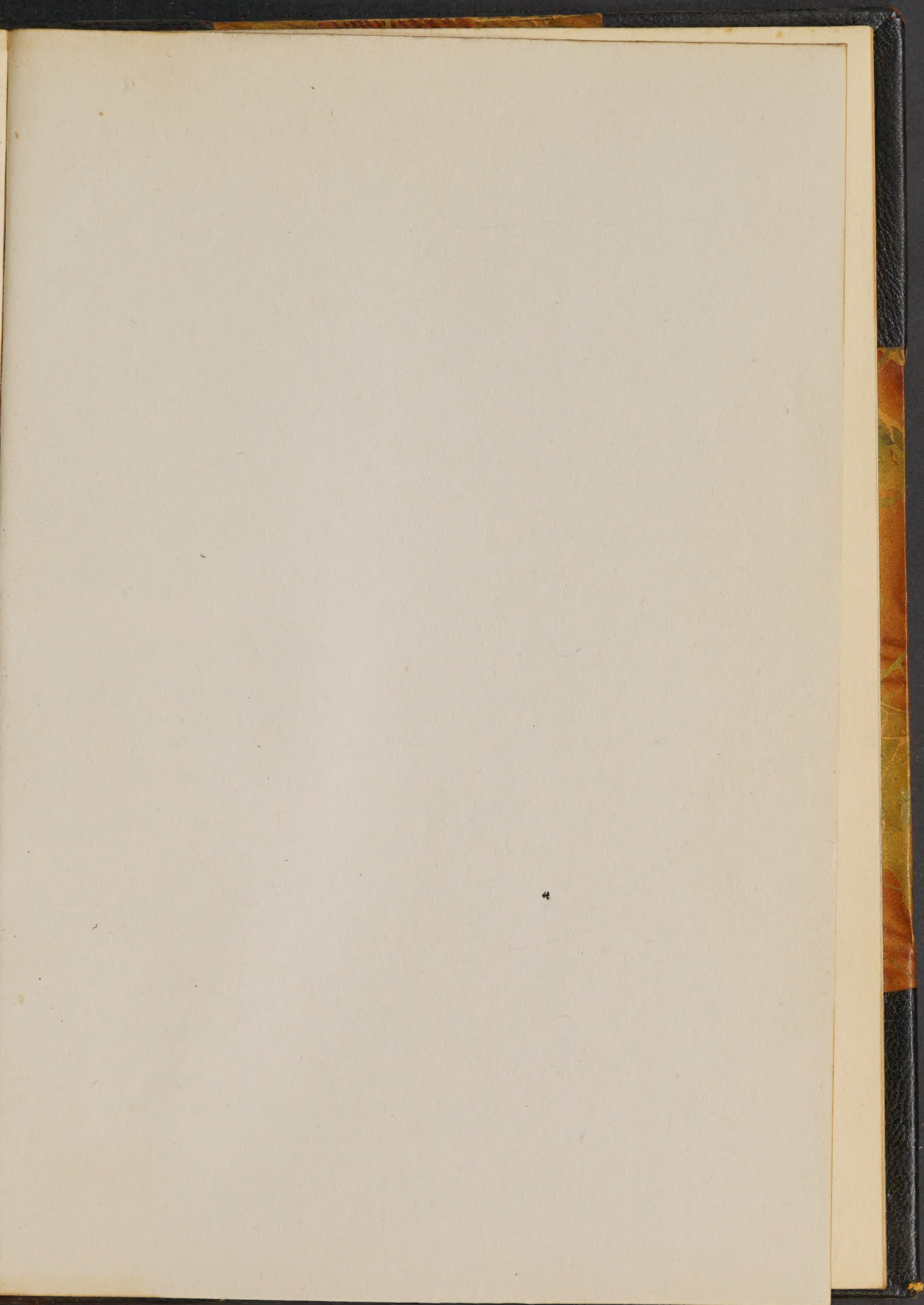


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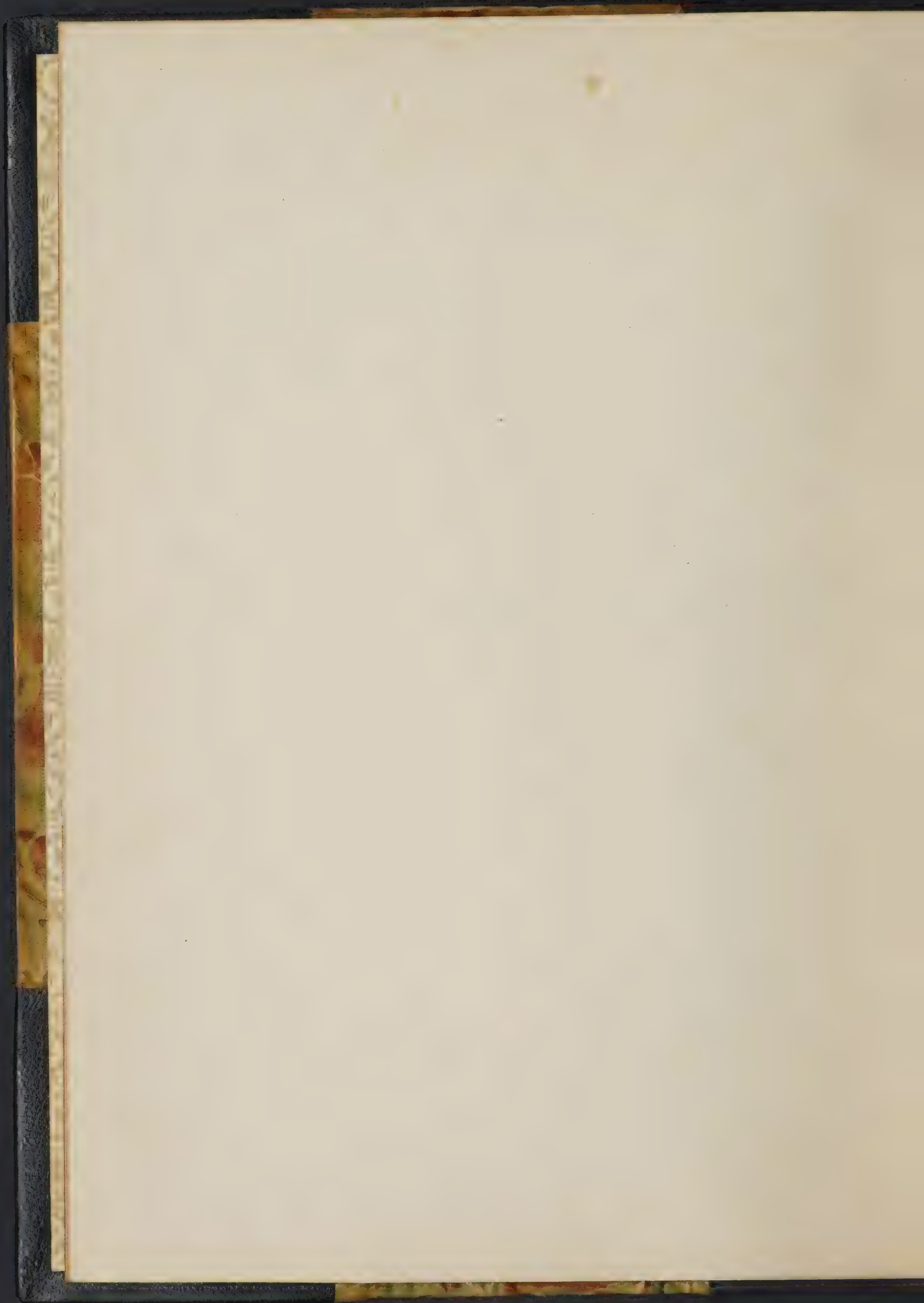






DOCTOR JOHNSON







# DR. JOHNSON

An Address delivered at the  
Johnson Bicentenary Celebration, at  
Lichfield, September 15,  
1909

By LORD ROSEBERY

*Authorised Edition*

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LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,—You have laid upon me a great honour and a cruel task. It is a great honour to be asked to speak of Johnson in his birthplace, by the community which honoured him when living, and has commemorated him since his death. But it is also a cruel task. Last year I jibbed, if I may so express myself, at the statue of Boswell, because it included Johnson, and now I have to deal with Johnson, who certainly includes Boswell. What is there left to say about either? Almost every eminent hand has tried his luck at them; it may in fact be considered a usual form of literary recreation. And though I have carefully avoided re-reading what others have written for fear of offering only a pale reflection of what they have better said, there is this further obstacle, Johnson has become the property of the English-speaking race. Every man has his little freehold there which no Chancellor of the Exchequer can tax. Every one resents an intrusion upon it, quite naturally, and I well know that whatever I may say I shall constantly break my shins at some cherished and preconceived opinion, and receive the natural objurgations of its upholders.

Three days hence will occur the two-hundredth anniversary of Johnson's birth in this ancient city of Lichfield. Born poor and scrofulous and half blind, and with an hereditary melancholy not far removed from madness, the advent of the small bookseller's son cannot have caused a ripple among your people. He seemed destined to his father's back shop until in the



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course of nature he should appear as principal in the front, in the pleasantest and most congenial of all modern trades, but rarely leading to fame. And yet it is this obscurest of events which we have this week hurried to Lichfield to celebrate. What is the cause of Johnson's extraordinary hold upon us, of his immortality among us? It does not, I think, mainly rest upon his works. His twelve volumes sleep, I fear, on our shelves, at least they do on mine. He has written two of the noblest poems in the language, yet these, I think, have only once been separately printed, in 1785; though they contain immortal lines, and were the poems that Walter Scott, so remote in style and thought, most admired, much as Byron admired Pope. His *Lives of the Poets* are destined, I think, to an enduring reputation. He cannot always appreciate; he is unjust to Gray; some of his criticisms remind one of the poulterer's phoenix of Whitbread; they seem not infrequently to gauge poetry in the spirit of an exciseman. His critical faculty indeed did not always inspire confidence. He could not enjoy 'Lycidas,' he did not care for Theocritus, his prejudice against Gray was even stronger than it appears in the 'Lives,' he greatly preferred Richardson to Fielding. His Shakespearian criticism is, I believe, held by competent judges not to possess any special value.

But the 'Lives' are terse, vigorous and delightful sketches of poets and poetasters, which once one has taken them in hand one can scarcely lay down; and one cannot doubt that these are destined to a long life; for they are the work of a master of letters dealing with that department of literature which he loved the best, so that genius and inclination worked hand in hand. But who



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reads the rest? I speak only for myself. The 'Rambler's' and the 'Idlers' are dead for me. I hope that there are others more fortunate. 'Rasselas,' I read not voluntarily, but assiduously at school, and, probably for that reason, never wish to read again. Even the thought of this celebration could not overcome my repugnance. Of 'Irene' it may be ambiguously said that it is like no other tragedy in existence, and that it leaves the reader cold and less than cold. I have read for business purposes speeches under other names, which he no doubt composed. But speaking as an individual and illiterate Briton I make this confession; I make it in dust and ashes, with a sheet and a candle, under every visible form of penance, but I cannot honestly withhold it. And, after all, two poems and some pleasing biographies do not of themselves as a rule constitute a claim to lasting fame.

He was, I think, our greatest man of letters in a large sense of that vague term. The variety of his writings in what we should now consider as periodicals, his knowledge of literature, his dealings with literature, his command of literature, the mass of his writing discovered or untraced which he could scarcely recall himself, his passionate interest in letters, above all his conversance with literary biography, entitles him to that position. It is a reputation which would vaguely have remained to him even had his works not survived. But it would have been a fame widely different from that concrete and personal base on which he is now established for ever.

Then, again, there is that which does not appear in his works, the great Dictionary. Here our consciences are easy, for no one is known to have read a



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dictionary through except Lord Chatham, who boasted that he had read Bailey's Dictionary twice through. This is an idle vaunt which none would wish to emulate, though Boswell tells us, not without truth, that Johnson 'was so attentive in the choice of the passages in which the words are authorised, that one may read page after page of his Dictionary with improvement and pleasure.' The enterprise of a dictionary is indeed a vast task, which Johnson like a hero undertook single-handed, and accomplished in less than nine years. That no doubt was what originally gave Johnson his fame. Such a fame of itself would scarcely extend to the fifth or sixth generation, for it is the melancholy fate of dictionaries to be superseded. But the man who frames a dictionary, and a great dictionary, in an age when such collections are few and barren, at once attains a singular, though not necessarily a lasting fame. That reputation Johnson achieved, his work became proverbial, and Johnson's Dictionary was the authority to which all appealed. We all remember it as Miss Pinkerton's prize book in the first chapter of *Vanity Fair*, but we do not often handle it in these days.

I come then to this conclusion, speaking always for myself alone, that his literary fame substantially survives in the two supreme poems, the *Lives of the Poets* and the Dictionary, but that if these stood alone, remarkable as they are, we should not be assembled here to-day. I pass then to the most solid base, Boswell, and the figure which remains eternally resting on Boswell.

Boswell himself remains an enduring problem. He is universally acknowledged as the prince of all biographers, chief in a department of literature which is perhaps the most popular and appreciated of all. And



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yet until last year, so far as I know, there existed no memorial, no bust, no statue of him anywhere, whereas second-rate poets, third-rate statesmen, fourth-rate soldiers would have their effigies in suitable places. This was not from want of recognition, but from the complexity of his character. On one side of him he was the most preposterous of human beings, of an eccentricity which partook of insanity, but which was always grotesque. In his youth he aimed only at notoriety, and was content to exhibit himself in any capacity so long as he could obtain attention. In his intimate correspondence with his bosom friend, Temple, he displays a childish vanity, a volatile self-sufficiency, a total insensibility to ridicule which makes the collection some of the most amusing reading on record, till it ends in piteousness and tragedy. And yet all this time he must have had the root of the matter in him. Such a biographer as he is, is born not made. And so we realise him as a strange compound of incredible vanity, fatuity, and absurdity, in which, as precious and unexpected as radium, is amalgamated enough of genius to leaven and redeem the whole.

He had assuredly the root of the matter in him from the first. He had primarily the instinct of hero-worship, but that was not enough; he had to know how to turn it to the best advantage. Here he had an instinct which did not fail him. To be with his subject by day and by night, on every possible occasion to absorb him as it were essentially by the pores of the skin, so as, to use his own strange expression, 'to become strongly impregnated with the Johnsonian æther,' to disdain no detail as trivial which added to the completeness and perfection of the portrait, all this



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Boswell understood as no other man has understood. After giving an account of his hero's clucking like a hen, and blowing like a whale, holding his hand on one side and rubbing his left knee in the same direction, and so forth, he says with admirable sense and discrimination: 'I am fully aware of how very obvious an occasion I here give for the sneering jocularities of such as have no relish for an exact likeness; which to render complete, he who draws it must not disdain the slightest strokes.' And again: 'I cannot allow any fragment whatever that floats in my memory concerning the great subject of this work to be lost. Though a small particular may appear trifling to some, it will be relished by others; while every little spark adds something to the general blaze; and to please the true, candid, warm admirers of Johnson, and in any degree increase the splendour of his reputation, I bid defiance to the shafts of ridicule and even of malignity.' This is the true Boswellian spirit, content to be a martyr so that he might increase the completeness of his delineation in the slightest degree. And he immolated himself to his subject. It was not only the bitterness of his critics that he had to encounter. Their shafts of ridicule were blunt compared to those which he had to encounter from the hero himself. For the recorder of Johnson had to be content to bear the heaviest strokes that a random wit could suggest. To portray Johnson in all his moods one had to be out in all weathers, to be tossed and buffeted, with rare consolations of benignant serenity. All this and more Boswell was ready to face provided he could secure what was wanted, the speaking likeness of his hero; what he himself called 'the Flemish picture which I give of my friend.' And so we seem to see him like St.



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Sebastian in the pictures, bound to Johnson's reputation, and perforated with arrows from every quarter. His sufferings, which he did not grudge, have procured to posterity a lasting pleasure, and we here who all boast ourselves to be 'true, candid, warm admirers of Johnson' tranquilly enjoy the society that he had enjoyed in full and delightful measure. Honour and gratitude then to him. I speaking from experience can say that in sickness when all other books have failed, when Dickens, Thackeray, Walter Scott, and other magicians have been useless to distract, Boswell's book is the only one which could engage and detain the languid attention of an invalid.

By far the most striking feature of their connection to me is how Johnson and Boswell became connected at all. Let it be at once conceded that Boswell was determined to make Johnson's acquaintance, and that when Boswell was determined to make an acquaintance there was no human possibility of preventing him; there was no personage or situation so inaccessible as not to have to receive him if he desired it. That, however, might only be a terminable acquaintance. But here is an awkward, rather ridiculous young Scotsman, with an accent of which the best that Johnson could say was that it was not offensive, belonging to a race which Johnson hated with a hatred which was almost insane, a youth at once impudent, pushing and fawning, in a word, all that was most repellent to Johnson, attempting to force the acquaintance of the most formidable and the most dreaded of literary tyrants. For two years Boswell had hoped and languished. One year he had expectations from Derrick, the next he had a prospect through the elder Sheridan, both rudely marred. At



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last Johnson appears suddenly to him as he sits drinking tea in a bookseller's parlour. The trembling Boswell is presented, and his nationality is divulged. Johnson at once rends him. 'This stroke,' says Boswell, 'stunned me a good deal.' But he recovers, attempts another remark, and receives another mortal snub. 'I now felt myself much mortified . . . and in truth had my ardour not been uncommonly strong, and my resolution uncommonly persevering, so rough a reception might have deterred me for ever from making any further attempts.' But within eight days he is in Johnson's private room, sketching, so to speak, on his thumbnail the little old shrivelled unpowdered wig striving in vain to compass the mighty head, the breeches loose at the knee and so leaving the stockings loose, and other 'slovenly particulars'; the same costume, by the bye, in which, at a late period, with a 'noise like thunder,' Johnson hurried down from his lodgings into the street to escort Madame de Boufflers to her carriage in Fleet Street, amid a wondering and probably scoffing crowd. Before Boswell leaves the great man he has invited Johnson to supper and received an acceptance. And within three months, as he had to pursue his studies at Utrecht, Johnson volunteers to accompany him to Harwich. In the meantime they have been supping and drinking and conversing together, Boswell determined to know as much of Johnson as possible, and Johnson not unwilling to be known. And so it culminates in this 'raw, uncouth young Scot' (he was only twenty-two) dragging the great man from his moorings, dragging him from London, the place he loved best, and taking him on a frisk to Harwich. It was Johnson, indeed, who volunteered. 'I must see



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thee out of England : I will accompany you to Harwich.' That he should use 'thee' and 'you' in the same sentence shows how deeply the lexicographer was moved. It was the day of their famous jaunt to Greenwich, when they 'took a sculler at the Temple Stairs and set out for Greenwich,' then 'landed at the Old Swan and walked to Billingsgate,' where they 'took oars and moved smoothly along the silver Thames,' a picture which almost consoles us for the present dearth of river steamers. They dined at Greenwich and walked in the Park which they thought 'not equal to Fleet Street,' returned in a boat by night, Boswell shivering, for which he was reproved by his illustrious friend, and so returned to genial conviviality at the 'Turk's Head,' concluding the day 'very socially.' It was then in the warmth of his heart that Johnson volunteered. The day of their first meeting was May 16th, in little more than two months Johnson has expressly promised to accompany Boswell to the Hebrides, declaring that 'there are few persons whom I take so much to as to you,' and on August 5th they were setting off in the Harwich stage-coach after a fashion which reminds one irresistibly of Mr. Pickwick setting off with Mr. Winkle. Surely this may be called Love at second sight.

How can one explain this sudden heat of affection, which was to last for the rest of their lives ?

We can only conjecture. There was probably something ingenuous about the young fellow which appealed to Johnson, his open adoration was not displeasing though it sometimes bored him, he early discerned I think that Boswell would be his biographer though not for years afterwards did Boswell openly talk in that character. Then Boswell probably appealed to his



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sense of humour, and above all the young Scot was an invaluable butt. His pertinacity and tactlessness were sometimes intolerable; but his pertinacity was a compliment, and his tactlessness would always be open to a rebuff which Johnson did not object to administering. 'Sir,' he broke out one day, 'you have but two topics, yourself and me. I am sick of both!' But as a rule Boswell's fussiness and grotesqueness did not, to use the modern phrase, get on his nerves. His system, though morbid in some particulars, was in this robust. The family he collected round him would have afflicted a more fastidious benefactor. Add to this that Johnson saw in Boswell a young fellow devoted to himself, a Tory as highflown as himself, with accesses of melancholy not unlike his own, addicted to various follies, but with a real love of learning and an honest though distracted ambition, whom he could guide and assist as a son. There was much of the paternal in his relation to his biographer.

Lastly, and there is perhaps most in this consideration, Johnson under his rough exterior had a heart of manly tenderness. 'No man alive,' said Goldsmith, who often suffered under him, 'has a more tender heart. He has nothing of the bear but his skin.' He realised Boswell's enthusiasm, and his heart went out to the lad. Boswell loved him and so he came to love Boswell. Much more might be said on this point, which is full of interest to students of human nature. But it would occupy too much space in a short address to dwell on it further. What one must remember in this strange partnership is that the canvas was first spread when the artist was twenty-two and the subject fifty-four, and that Johnson was sitting for his portrait



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for the rest of his life, while Boswell waited pencil in hand and 'constantly watched every dawning of communication from that great and illuminated mind.'

What then makes this book so extraordinary, so unique, is this, that it is the photographic delineation of a great man by a daily, hourly, and minute observer, who disdained no pains or detail to make his picture perfect, who was willing himself to be a butt, not merely of his patron's cruel pleasantries, but of the world at large, so that he might produce a living speaking portrait. There is nothing like it. The price of success in such a work is more than most men care to pay. For it cannot be denied that as with poverty in Juvenal's famous lines it tends to make those who write it ridiculous; the recorder has to be a foil to the recorded. And so Boswellian imitations are rare. The books which occur to me as resembling it are all foreign, and, as Boswell's book has never, I believe, been translated into any language, though there is, I believe, an abstract in Russian, they are not strictly imitations. Eckermann's records of Goethe's conversations lack nature and simplicity, we feel that all is transacted in full dress. Another recent journalist was content to endure hard things so that he might collect the crumbs which fell from a great man's table; but the crumbs had better have gone whither other crumbs go. Gourgaud's *Journal at St. Helena* comes perhaps nearest to Boswell's life as the faithful constant portraiture of a great man by a resident observer. But Gourgaud had not Boswell's qualities, and there was not sufficient play of life at St. Helena to lighten the record.

Such biographies must be rare, if only because great



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men are rare, and Boswells still rarer. And great men, even when you find them, are not always various. The conversations of the Duke of Wellington, which have been sedulously recorded, certainly lack this quality. And so if we delight in Boswell for the picturesqueness and fidelity of his representation, we acknowledge that that would be of little value without the greatness and variety of the subject. We may fairly suppose that had Boswell similarly attached himself to Paoli, Oglethorpe, Rousseau, or any other of his idols, he would have produced a remarkable book (though Rousseau we may be sure would not long have tolerated his intrusive familiarity), but a book wholly unequal to that on which his fame securely reposes, for in Johnson he had an exceptional model. He would not, it is probable, have added to Rousseau's fame; he might have prolonged that of Paoli and Oglethorpe; but he has rendered Johnson immortal by the qualities of Johnson himself manifested through his own.

The book then remains and is likely to remain unique because of the peculiar genius of the biographer and the subject. Its rank in literature is unparalleled. It is annotated and commentated as if it were Holy Writ. Except the Greek and Latin Classics and the Scriptures, I know of no book which has been treated with such reverence. Croker began with an edition which Macaulay denounced, but which, whether good or bad, illustrates the elaboration of treatment which Boswell's book seems to elicit, and without forgetting the delightful edition of Napier, as well as countless others, we end with Dr. Birkbeck Hill's prodigious and exhaustive collections, a sort of Cornelius à Lapide on Boswell, in which at least ten massive volumes are con-



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secrated to Johnson—all interesting, all worth publishing, an almost unprecedented homage of worship.

From first to last the book is all good, there is not a dull page in it. There is, I think, one unsurpassed episode which is worth recalling as being the gem of the whole book: I mean the story of Dr. Johnson's first meeting with Wilkes. The narrative is told with admirable raciness. We admire the consummate diplomacy of Boswell, in face of the difficulty of securing Johnson to meet a man he abhorred, luring his elephant to capture with extraordinary skill; then, when they met, Wilkes's material attentions to Johnson: 'Pray give me leave, Sir, a little of the brown, some fat, Sir, a little of the stuffing—some gravy, let me have the pleasure of giving you some butter—allow me to recommend a squeeze of this orange,' and so forth; so that Johnson, who looks at him at first with 'surly virtue' is reconciled through the palate to his bugbear, and they talk together the whole evening with brilliancy and even cordiality. As we read, we realise the whole affair, the crafty crimp Boswell, the wheedling demagogue, and the reluctant moralist.

This is a specimen of the whole book; the best, I think, but there are many scarcely inferior. And so we have for ever before us, living and vigorous, one of the most interesting of our great men, the greatest, I suppose, of our men of letters, certainly our greatest known conversationalist, with his manifold tricks of speech, his eccentricities, his strange, uncouth ways. Of all the men whom we have never seen Johnson is the man whom we know best, whom we can best imagine, whom we can most easily fancy that we have seen and heard. His appearance in this hall at this



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moment would no doubt cause a sensation, but in five minutes it would be the sensation of a friend restored to us after a long absence abroad. It is that feeling, common, I think, to all of us, which is the supreme tribute to Boswell's work. We can fancy him approaching now, rumbling and grumbling, 'What is this concourse of silly people, Sir?' 'This is strange nonsense, Sir.' 'To celebrate a man's birthday without his consent is an impertinence, Sir.' 'What is it to you, Sir, whether I am two hundred years old or not? Methuselah, of whom we know practically nothing, was undoubtedly my senior, and we do not commemorate him,' Boswell at his side obsequiously explaining and anticipating. Dubious grunts follow, possibly an explosion, but Lucy Porter, Molly Aston, Peter Garrick, and the Swards rally round him; he beams serenely and calls for tea.

And what manner of man was it whose portrait has been presented with so much unction and fidelity, whose reputation has been thus almost consecrated?

Well, in the first place he was emphatically a big man, a man who loomed large in his times, whose supremacy was acknowledged by the greatest of his contemporaries, who paid him an unquestioning homage. Gibbon, whose printed work is so much more remarkable and permanent, who was himself a conversational dictator, remained silent before him, and for that reason loved him not. The mighty mind of Burke met his with reverence. He enchained the brilliant intellect of Windham. The delightful genius of Goldsmith worshipped also, though it sometimes chafed. Garrick and Reynolds, in their own arts supreme, acknowledged his supremacy. There is,



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perhaps, no trustworthy record of so much respect paid by so many remarkable men to one whom they regarded as more remarkable than themselves. Neither of the Pitts or Mansfield seem to have known him, and they stand out as exceptions from the curious crowd of intellect which came to him. Mansfield's abstinence is strange and unaccountable, except on the hypothesis that he resented or feared Johnson's dislike to Scotsmen, and no doubt Johnson ignorantly disliked him. Otherwise few abstained from the pious pilgrimage, though some did not care to take it more than once. It was the same sort of testimony that was rendered to Bolingbroke, whose character we may not admire and whose works we may not taste, but whose quality we recognise in receiving tribute of admiration from such men as Pope and Swift.

Secondly, we see in him the truest love of his own kind, of humanity at large. If the proper study of mankind be man, Johnson was a supreme student, for it was the dominating interest of his life. He had known and mixed with all classes from the highest to the lowest—all sorts and conditions of men and women, from George III. to Bet Flint. His strangest acquaintance was, perhaps, Santerre, who was destined to drown with his drums the dying words of Louis XVI. Nothing, indeed, is more remarkable in his conversation than the way in which people keep rising up as it were whom no one suspected him to have known. In the period of his fame he was brought into contact with almost everybody worth knowing, for every one wanted to know him, and he was readily accessible. But he would readily recur to the years of famine when he prowled about London with Savage, and could sign



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his letters 'impransus.' And when he said that literary biography was his favourite study, it was in reality because it was a congenial branch of the great study of mankind. It presented itself, however, in its least agreeable form at his own hearth. Moved by benevolence, by his intense and compassionate love of his fellow creatures, he had collected around him a family of indigent persons, whose only recommendation was their want, who were querulous to him and quarrelsome with each other; Levett, a perambulating apothecary, 'obscurely wise and coarsely kind,' whose death he commemorated in lines of true pathos, but whom he described in prose as 'a brutal fellow, but his brutality is in his manners, not in his mind;' then there were those whom Johnson playfully called his seraglio, Mrs. Desmoulins, whom Levett hated with an unbounded hatred; Mrs. Williams, a blind and peevish versifier; and Poll Carmichael, whom Johnson described as 'a dull slut.' 'Williams,' he once wrote, 'hates everybody; Levett hates Desmoulins, and does not love Williams; Desmoulins hates them both; Poll loves none of them.' This was the domestic circle of that great intellect. Surely we may say that his heart was even greater, and that this is the part of Johnson's life most beautiful to us. 'If I did not assist them,' he said, 'no one else would.' But his charity and generosity were unbounded. It has been truly said by one who knew him well 'that the lame, the blind, and the sorrowful found in his house a sure retreat.' Once he found a poor woman lying exhausted in the street—one of the city waifs; he took her on his back, carried her to his house, and had her tenderly taken care of till she was restored to health, and put in a better way of life.



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But this ready and Christian charity was accompanied by a commonsense not less prompt. Of that there is no more comical instance than his method with Goldsmith in difficulties. The unfortunate poet sent word to Johnson that he was in great distress. Johnson at once sent a guinea, promising to follow it as soon as he was dressed. He went, and found the guinea had been changed, and that Goldsmith was sitting before a bottle of Madeira. Now comes the immortal touch. 'I put the cork into the bottle and desired that he would be calm.' The benefactor then walked off with *The Vicar of Wakefield* in his pocket, and sold it for sixty pounds.

He knew men well, with the exception, perhaps, of himself, for he was neither a 'good-humoured fellow' nor a polite fellow, as he proclaimed himself to be: his temper was extremely explosive, and no one could be so rude. But this contact with his fellows made him love the practical side of life. He 'loved business, loved to have his wisdom actually operate on real life.' He liked to advise Boswell on domestic economy and the management of his estate, to dictate opinions on legal points, to act as a general referee. He delighted in bustling about the brewery as Thrale's executor, with an inkhorn and pen in his buttonhole. Indeed he did not altogether escape the fatal fascination which Parliament exercises over literary men of high ability, Sirahan wrote a letter, to be shewn to Lord North, pointing out the value of the support which Johnson could give as a member of the House of Commons; a letter written probably with the privity of Johnson? And Johnson himself would sometimes regret that he had not made an attempt for fame in Parliament: a regret which has, perhaps, crossed the minds of most



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able men, but which is at least comprehensible in one who claimed to have composed many of the speeches attributed to our great orators. But this was, perhaps, less a matter of ambition than an aspect of his humanity; he wished to have a taste of everything that was savoury in life.

This essentially human nature of Johnson, combined with his insular existence, for his trip to Paris scarcely counts, and his expedition to the Hebrides strictly speaking was insular too, is one great secret of his popularity. He was John Bull himself. He exalted the character, of which he may be regarded as its sublime type, but he embodied the spirit. His Toryism was part of his John Bullism; his love of London was rather that of the John Bull than the cockney; his hatred of Scotland was that of the John Bull of his youth. When Foote threatened to caricature him, he furnished himself at once with an oaken cudgel. He asked the price of one, and, being told sixpence, demanded a shilling one. 'I'll have a double quantity.' Could anything be more John Bullish than this? Physically and combatively he embodied the character, not of the ordinary agricultural but of the literary John Bull. I must not, however, linger on this fancy. For we have to consider him in his most famous character as a conversationalist, and to treat this adequately would require an essay of itself.

Talk with him was not a luxury or an amusement, it was an article of prime necessity. He dreaded solitary or vacant moments, for he had then to cope with the terrors of constitutional melancholy, and as nothing but want of money could make him overcome his native indolence sufficiently to compel him to



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write, he was thrown back on conversation both as a prophylactic and as the intellectual exercise necessary for his mental health.

What is the impression that we derive from the vivid and careful reports of his talk? Well, the first salient fact is that he sate at the receipt of custom, at the counter of his intellectual bank, ready to honour all drafts. He did not apparently start his own topics, Boswell or some crony had to lure him on. Then he would turn on the powerful mechanism of his mind, twist the subject about, defend, if possible, some glaring paradox, and, warming to his work, might not impossibly gore his opponent. He was 'a tremendous companion,' as was happily said by one of the Garricks. Then one is struck with his choice of diction. He never seems to pause for a word; they come to him spontaneously; but he is never satisfied with the second best, it must always be that which exactly represents his conception. It was not always graceful, it was often pompous or Latinified, but it was always exact and expressive. He, again like Bolingbroke, had perfected his conversational style by a long-standing determination to express himself as well as possible on every occasion, whether trivial or not, and so he had acquired without effort a singular vigour of phrase.

Another signal feature of his conversation is this, that his little discourses spring forth unpremeditated but full-fledged; he gives the number of his reasons before he utters them, as if what he were going to say was already complete in his mind though the subject has only just been put before him. And this extraordinary quality goes far beyond conversation. He is



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ready at any moment, so far as one can judge, to dictate a paper admirable in argument, knowledge, and form on any topic that may be raised. Boswell brings him Scottish law cases, the great man bids him take the pen, pulls out as it were the necessary organ stop in his mind, and produces a remarkable essay. Take, for example, that which he dictated on the liberty of censure from the pulpit, an apparently mature production put forth on the spur of the moment, which earned the admiration of Burke.

What a journalist he would have made!—not merely from his readiness of ripe composition, but from the range of his mind and reading, as well as the ready and inexhaustible stores of his memory. One example must suffice to-day. At a dinner at Sir Joshua's, after Johnson has discoursed on the alleged fact that the brook which Horace describes in his voyage to Brindisi is still flowing, Mr. Cambridge quotes from a Spanish writer as to things fugitive surviving things seemingly permanent. Johnson at once caps this with a quotation from Janus Vitalis, a name which would remain unknown to most of us, did not the invaluable Birkbeck Hill tell us that he was a poet and theologian of Palermo who lived in the sixteenth century. No instance, though scores could be given, so well illustrates his readiness, his range of reading, and his memory. Adam Smith, a high authority, said that Johnson knew more books than any man alive. Dr. Boswell called him 'a robust genius born to grapple with whole libraries.' He seems indeed to have grappled with them. In his own strange way he tore the heart out of a book without reading it through, but carried away in his memory all that was abiding or material.



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But though his learning was always at command, it never seems obtrusive: his manliness saved him from pedantry.

Again, and as part of his John Bullism, note his robust commonsense. He abounded in commonsense, and also in some that was uncommon. But his commonsense never failed him. He would break in upon a discussion or sum it up with a sentence sometimes brutal, sometimes coarse, but always tersely expressing the core and commonsense of the matter. This quality made him intolerant of anything like sentimentalism or affectation. One of his special irritants was the idea that people composed better at some times and seasons than others, in spite of Milton, whose genius, we are told, flowed most happily 'from the autumnal equinox to the vernal.' For this he falls foul of Gray, not reluctantly, and of any one else who cherished this 'fantastic foppery.' He himself sate down, full or fasting, doggedly to work at one time as well as another, though we have to record that a whole year would sometimes pass without his producing anything at all. In the same spirit he would not admit that any one could be affected by the weather. That again was all stuff and fancy. This robustness carried him far. Though he became a water-drinker himself, he uttered many sentiments which teetotalers could not quote. Even in questions of morality he would often fail to satisfy the austere, or even some who are not. He could even on occasion slang a bargee in appropriate language.

Johnson is always called our great moralist, and, indeed, in his writings he earns the title. But when in a mocking mood, or from his love of paradox, or his



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honest scorn of cant, he often broaches opinions to which he certainly would not have given his deliberate authority. His epigrams should not be quoted as opinions or as anything but epigrams. He knew, indeed, that Boswell was preserving them for publication. But he probably gave posterity credit for discriminating between deliberate judgment and the caprice of easy conversation. In truth, his love of paradox and his delight in the exercise of his dialectic skill would make him sustain or controvert almost any imaginable proposition. This sometimes puzzled the less nimble-witted Boswell, who, however, got to understand him at last, and would lure him or gently goad him. But there were moments when he would not be guided or restrained, when the noble animal broke through all nets and precautions. Woe, then, to his opponent, for he could be truculent and even brutal, and conversation with him was a battle-field. 'He fought on every occasion,' said Reynolds, 'as if his whole reputation depended on the victory of the minute, and he fought with all the weapons. If he was foiled in argument he had recourse to abuse and rudeness.' In such a frenzy he could even insult Sir Joshua, the sweetest and most amiable member of his society. As Goldsmith said, who himself had suffered, quoting from a comedy of Cibber's: 'If his pistol does not go off, he knocks you down with the butt end.' But that is the way with all, or almost all, who claim predominance in conversation, and no one, when the fit was over, could be more anxious to appease the animosities that he had caused. With old Mr. Sheridan, whom he had hurt by a sarcasm, he sought reconciliation, but in vain. 'Great lords and ladies,



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too,' he said once, 'I think, give me up . . . . they don't like to have their mouths stopped.' Others, no doubt, shared the feelings of this sublime class, and after one trial remained away. Some categories of persons he did not seek to conciliate. He hated Whigs with a devout hatred: 'the first Whig,' he always said, 'was the devil.' He hated Scotsmen scarcely less, though his hatred came at last to be mainly an opportunity for jests, which now afford amusement to the most sensitive patriot. Freethinkers he detested most of all, though he could not resist Wilkes. And in his conversation there was this element of harmless and agreeable gambling. One never knew what side he would take; one never could guess his line of argument, for that was never commonplace; one never knew whether he would be warm or cold, irascible or serene. There was only this certainty, that he would be human, manly, and profoundly interesting.

His natural melancholy made him dread solitude; and he preferred his 'seraglio' to a lonely home. But as visitors were not certain, he sought mankind where he could find it, haunted taverns and founded clubs. His own illustrious Club, of which I have the misfortune to be the father, was founded in 1764 at the instance of Reynolds, and still survives in pristine vigour; successful candidates are still apprised of their election in the formula composed by Gibbon. We celebrated our founder's bi-centenary this year, as he would have wished, by a full dinner. That club he sedulously cherished so long as it was composed of a small knot of his most sympathetic friends; there he long reigned supreme. But its fame drew many can-



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didates of a kind impossible to exclude, but not all congenial. In 1777 it was proposed to increase the number of its members from twenty to thirty, which he approved. 'For as we have several in it,' he wrote, 'with whom I do not much like to consort with, I am for reducing it to a mere miscellaneous collection of conspicuous men without any determinate character.' Thenceforward then he attended it but little; but he dined there on June 22nd, in the last year of his life. But such was his passion for this form of society that but a twelvemonth before his death he not merely resuscitated a small club of his early days which had met in Ivy Lane; but, though moribund, and knowing himself to be on the verge of the grave, he founded a new club at the 'Essex Head,' which he ardently promoted. Reynolds objected to some of the company and refused to belong, but Johnson was less nice. To him, society of some kind was a necessity of life, a refuge from the dark terrors of solitude, he had known and enjoyed it in all forms, and so his new club with its dubious element continued, and was prolonged for some years after Johnson's death.

What more remains? The highest of all, the great Christian soul, the ardent champion and firm bulwark of the faith. It was not always so. For some years, Johnson tells us, he was wholly regardless of religion, indeed a 'lax talker' against it. That was in youthful days. But when after meeting Boswell he comes under our close view, all that is changed. This is not to say that he was free from the anguish of doubt, for that is not the impression he gives. But first and last with him stands his religious faith. He was a High Churchman of the old school, sometimes intolerant



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of Nonconformists, but on the whole of a broad embracing scope. 'All Richard Baxter's books are good, read them all,' he would say. On other occasions he would speak warmly against the Church of Rome, sometimes defending it so warmly, when it was attacked, that one of his friends died under the belief that he was of that communion. Finally, he would declare that 'all denominations of Christians have really little difference in point of doctrine, though they may differ widely in external form.' He was, it may be seen, however strict and earnest an Anglican himself, large and generous in his comprehension.

None the less did his extreme conscientiousness inspire him with an abnormal fear of death, much more than men of infinitely less virtue. 'Death, my dear, is very dreadful,' he wrote to his stepdaughter ten months before his end. But when he thought that it was near, he displayed a high composure, and he wrote the most striking of his letters. 'Dear Sir, it has pleased God this morning to deprive me of the power of speech; and as I do not know but that it may be His farther good pleasure to deprive me soon of my senses, I request you will on receipt of this note come to me and act for me as the exigencies of my case may require.' And when the shadow was finally on him, he was able to recognise that what was coming was divine, an angel, though formidable and obscure; and so he passed with serene composure beyond mankind.

Men like this are the stay of religion in their time, and for those who come after. Laymen who hold high and pure the standard of their faith do more for Christianity, it may safely be averred, than a multitude of priests. To say this is not to disparage

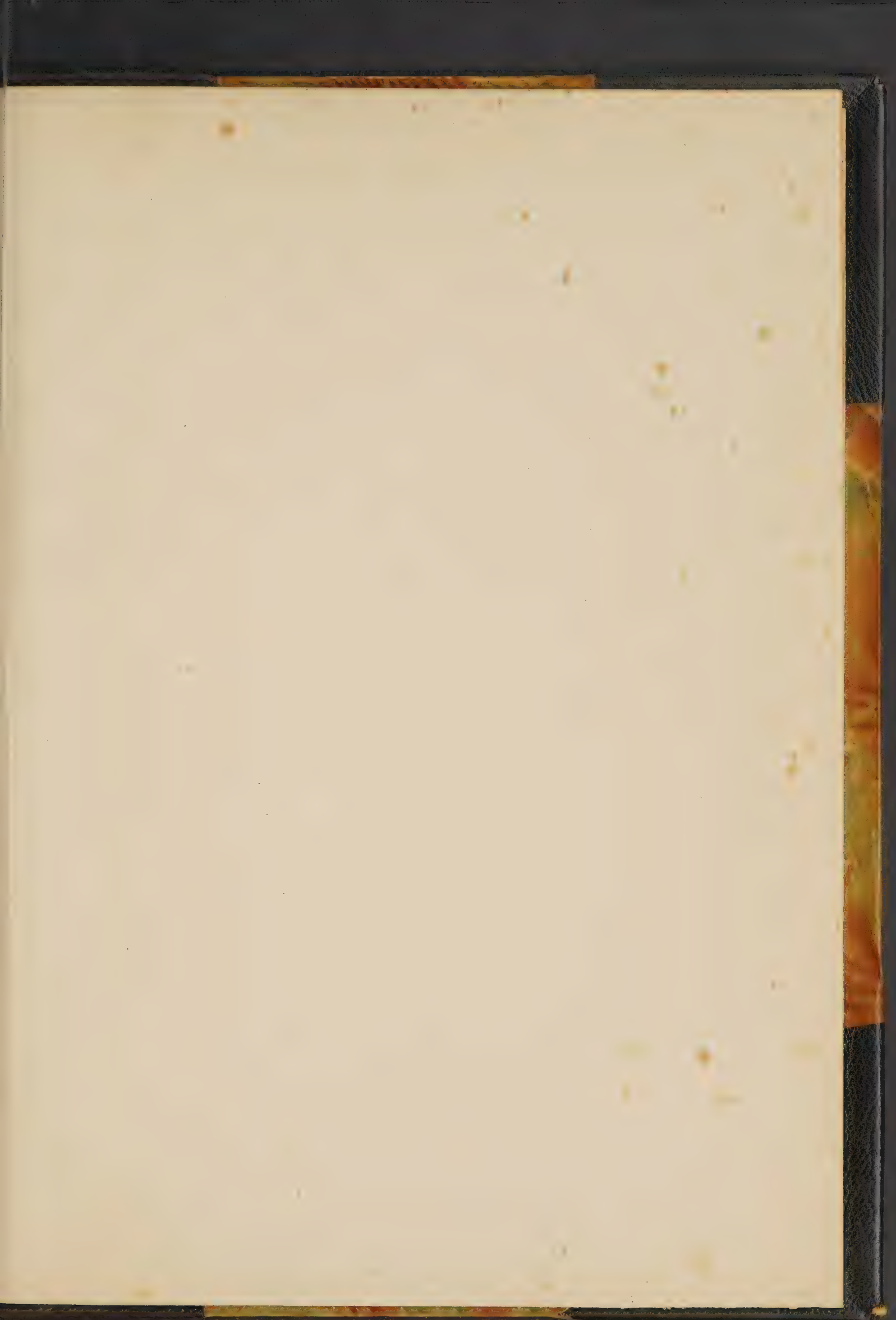


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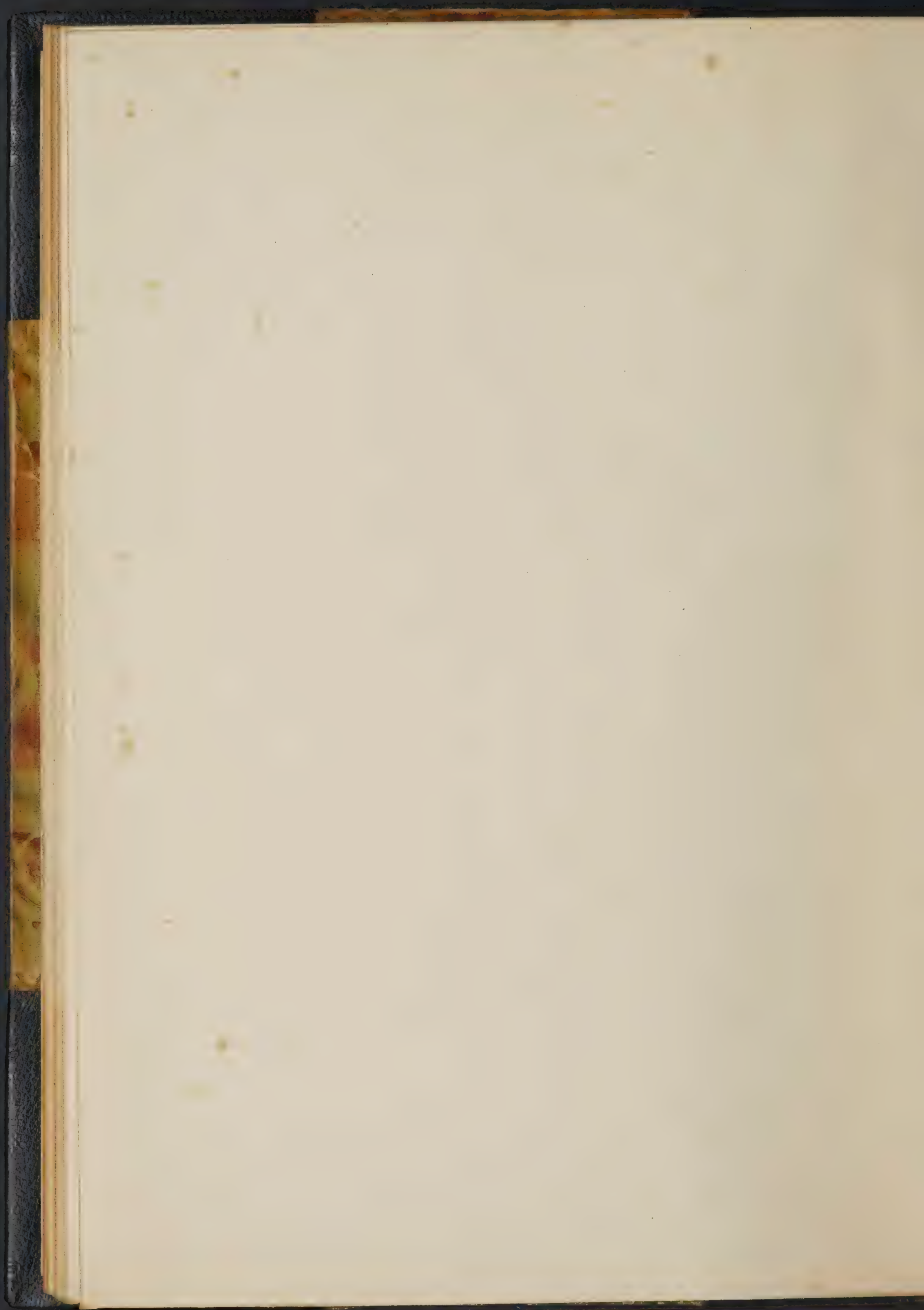
the clergy ; rather the reverse, for it implies that their course is regular and habitual. But their championship is felt to be the natural result of their profession and their vows, while the conspicuous layman, who is also a conspicuous Christian, has all the honours of a volunteer. No one, I think, can doubt that Samuel Johnson and William Ewart Gladstone were priceless champions of their faith, and that their places will not easily be filled.

And now we have lingered long enough, perhaps too long, round this absorbing figure, and must perforce leave him. There is a human majesty about him which commands our reverence, for we recognise in him a great intellect, a huge heart, a noble soul. He lived under grievous torments, in dread of doubt, in dread of madness, in terror of death, yet he never flinched ; he stood four square to his own generation as he stands to posterity. We leave him more reluctantly than any of the dead, for he is the only one with whom we can hold converse, and so it is with the conviction that it will not be for long ; as life is insipid without him. Therefore we do not say good-bye. Rather let us think that we have only paid one more pilgrimage to his shrine ; for though his dust rests with a whole Sahara of various kinds in Westminster Abbey, his memory, which lives throughout the Anglo-Saxon world, is especially green in Fleet Street and in Lichfield. We salute once more with reverence to-day the memory of that brave, manly, tender soul, and pass on with the hope that from his abundant store we may draw some measure of faith and courage to sustain our own lives.

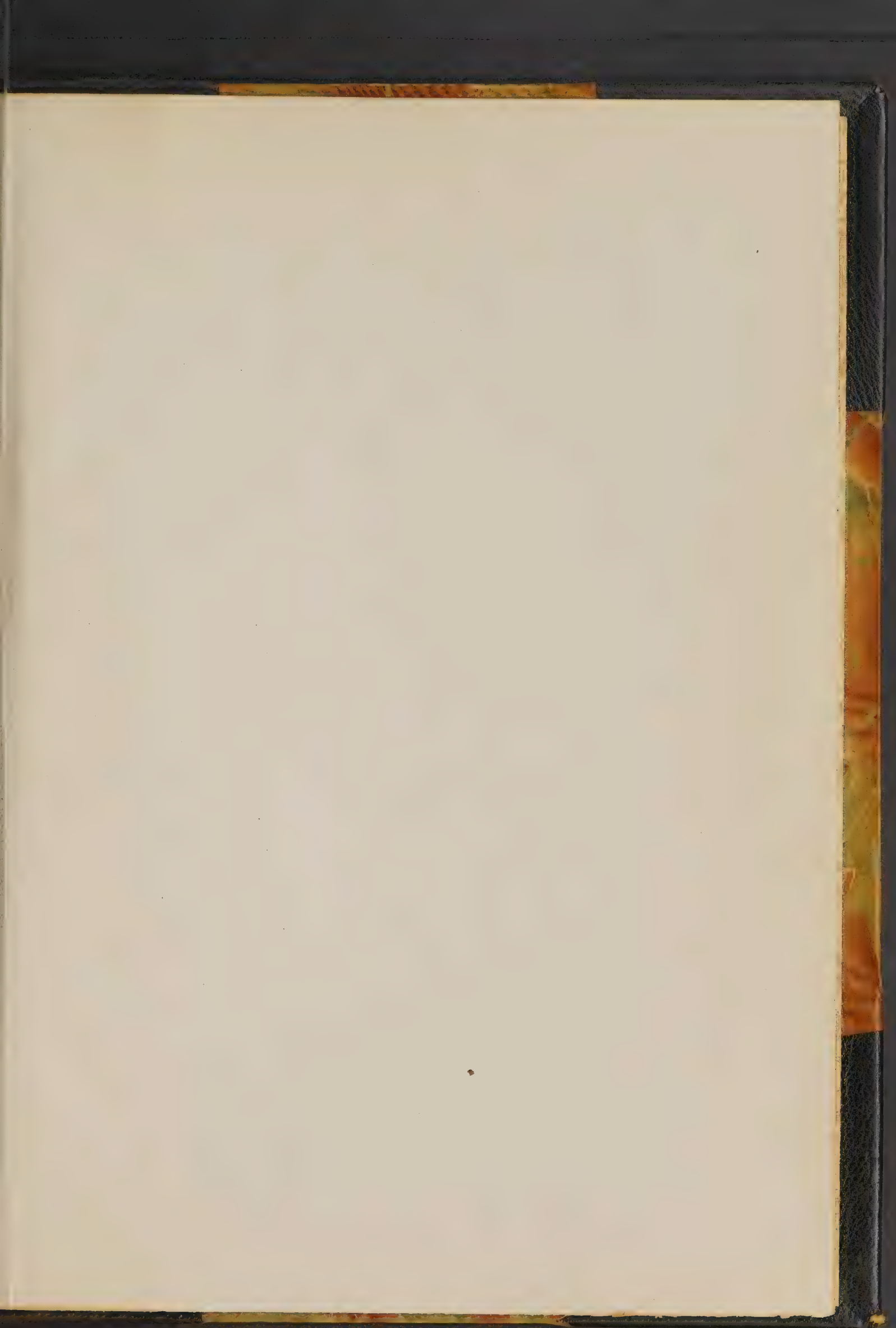


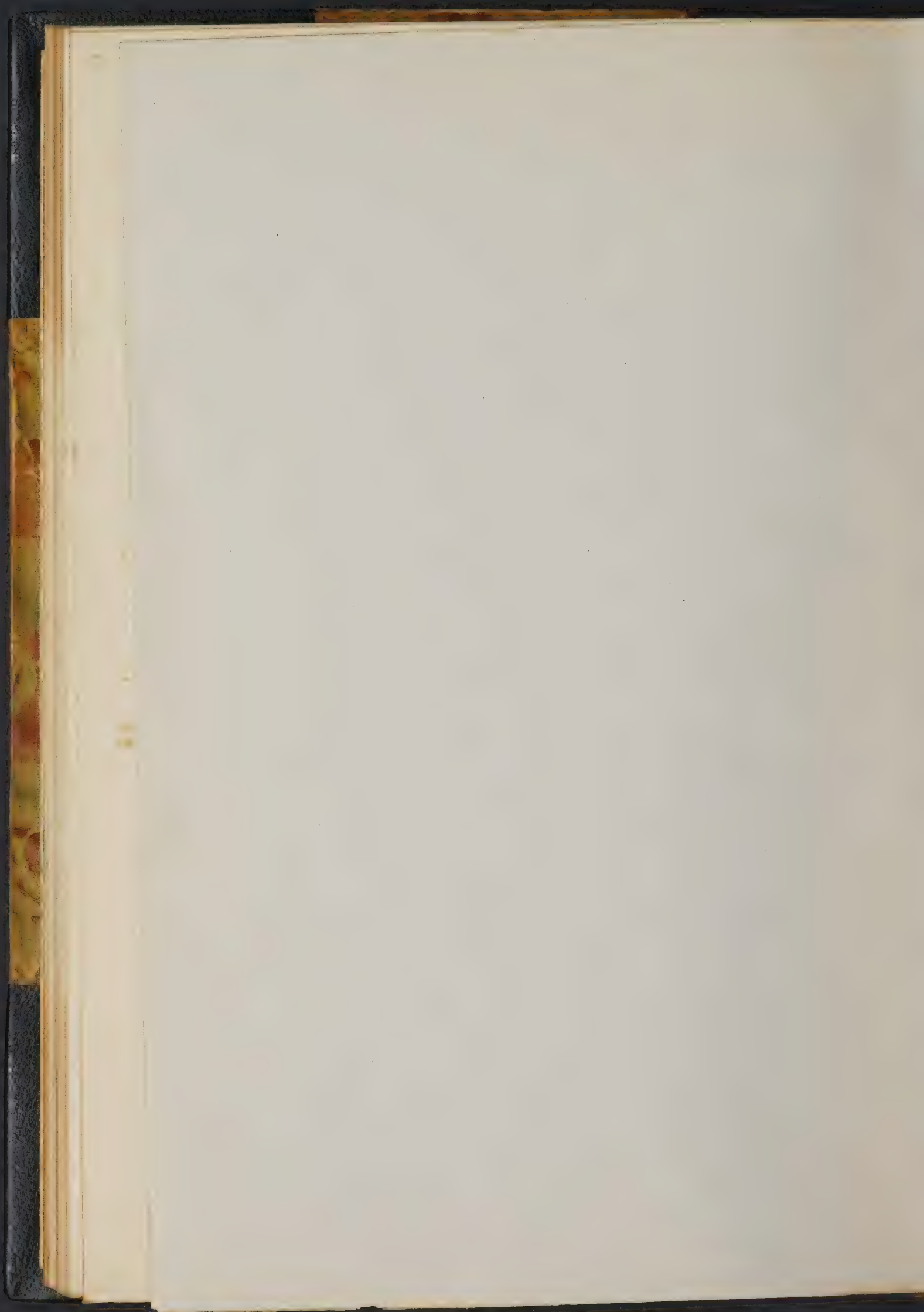














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